DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 105 519 CS 202 051

AUTHOR Tourney, Leonard D.
TITLE Imitation: Creative Possibilities of an Unfashionable Doctrine.
PUB DATE Mar 75
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (26th, St. Louis, March 13-15, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Composition (Literary); Creative Writing; *Imitation; Models; *Student Writing Models; Teaching Procedures; *Teaching Techniques; *Writing; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

Imitation can be a useful method of teaching students to write well. Imitations may be "loose" or "close." Loose imitation aims for faint resemblance; it requires a perception of a particular model that looks at its most conspicuous features, such as tone, arrangement of ideas, and the general character of the diction. Close imitation aims at strong resemblance and therefore requires rigorous analysis. The student must deal with the model concretely, as a piece of writing, and the instructor must track every rhetorical effect to its source. As a procedure, close imitation fills one of the most conspicuous gaps in modern rhetorical theory, the absence of a practical heuristic. Close imitation also may produce in the student a heightened sense of form and sharpens the student's sense of style. This paper concludes that close imitation formalizes and condenses a natural impulse to write. (TS)

ED105519

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Imitation: Creative Possibilities of an Unfashionable Doctrine[1]

Leonard D. Tourney
University of Tulsa

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Leonard D. Tourney
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER

The child, Aristotle observed, loves to copy,[2] and finding the impulse no less compelling in the man, the sage Greek held imitation a fundamental principle of art. What Aristotle meant by imitation (mimesis) can be debated, as may its relationship to the forms and substance of art. But few question the naturalness of the impulse. Imitation accounts for too much: for social conventions and private morals, styles and fashions in ideas and dress: the special language of teenagers, dope-addicts, truckdrivers, and sailors; the peculiar behavior of lovers, hold-up men, film stars, and politicians. It explains why I speak English rather than Greek, and after the fashion of Southern Californians rather than New Englanders. Even our rare rebellion against custom can be interpreted as a conversion to a different set of models. All experience is exemplary. Linguists may talk about deep structures; at least the superficial ones can be more easily accounted for. We simplify, but not greatly, if we observe that we do what we have seen, say what we have heard, write what we have read.

CS 202 051

Given its preeminence as a human activity, it is not surprising that imitation should be the oldest way of learning and teaching composition. But imitation has fallen on hard times as a pedagogical strategy. Today we prize creativity, originality, sincerity, and to these a dependence on "models" seems as antithetical as the terrestrial poles. Nothing suggests more our disesteem for an imitation than the bad verbal company it keeps. Imitations are, variously, cheap, facile, bad, and mere. They cost less.

George Kennedy's two excellent books on the practice of rhetoric among the Greeks and Romans make one thing clear:[3] that "a way of writing imitation was in the ancient world both the method and eminently respectable. The prevalence of imitation can be explained by our forefather's inordinate fondness for old writers. "It is a universal rule of life," Quintilian observed in the tenth book of his Institutes, "that we should wish to copy what we approve in others";[4] and Macrobius proclaimed in his Saturnalia that "the fruit of reading is to emulate what one finds good in others, and by adaptation to convert what one most admires in others to one's own use."[5] As for the respectability of imitation, that can be credited to the distinction of its practitioners. Among the Romans Virgil was acclaimed because of his imitation of Homer, not because he had done anything novel or original. In antiquity--indeed, until comparatively recent times--the writer

looked backward, valued what has been proven, considered even subject matter of another author public property, and held a debt to an older author as a sign of his own good judgment.

Practically speaking, imitation meant putting a young scholar to school to a model, disciplining him to shape his own utterances after a master's fashion. Success, it followed, meant achieving Senecan brevity, Ciceronian opulence, Demosthenean fluency--to name a few of the prevailing exemplars. Out of fairness to the old rhetoricians it should be said that imitation was no simple business. As Quintilian clearly explained it presupposed an analytic ability of no mean order:

> But imitation...should not be confined merely to words. We must consider the appropriateness with which those orators handle the circumstances and persons involved in the various cases in which they were engaged, and observe the judgment and powers of arrangement which they reveal, and the manner in which everything they say, not excepting those portions of their speeches which seem designed merely to delight their audience, is concentrated on securing the victory over their opponents. We must note their procedure in the exordium, the method and variety of their statement of facts, the power displayed in proof and refutation, the skill revealed in their appeal to every kind of emotion, and the manner in which they make use of popular applause to serve their case...If we have thoroughly appreciated all these points, we shall be able to imitate our models with accuracy.[5]

With what zeal our medieval and Renaissance forbears aped the teaching methods of the ancients is a commonplace of intellectual history. They even venerated the same models, as we learn from Morris Croll's great essays on the development of

English prose style. Our devotion to imitation persists today, although often only by implication, in the collections of readings with which we enrich the rhetorical diet of freshman writers. Such "readers" as their editor's notes inevitably confess, serve to model the principles of rhetoric, exemplify the modes of discourse, generate class discussion. There is no denying that many of us remain convinced that one way to learn to write is to sit at the feet, figuratively at least, of someone who has already learned the trick.

Why students do not learn the trick from the "readers" is variously explained. Some say the models are too difficult, others that their subject-matter is dull, or irrelevant. But I believe the major difficulty with writing models in the classroom is not their difficulty or their irrelevance but our uncertainty as to how a model can be profitably used.

Non-writers or beginners read solely for content. If they understand what a passage means, they do not worry too much about how it does so. But any piece of prose, as we know, is both an expression of an idea and a transcript of options elected or options refused. Rhetorical principles are the basis of these choices, but taught abstractly, these principles might as well not be taught at all. They are boring; the compete with Euclidean theorems for dullness; they misrepresent composition as an human activity as arid as the Sahara and as devoid of life as outerspace. Even when exemplified, they are likely

to seem an imposition upon the way language operates rather than principles that permit language to do so. What is needed is not exemplification but the actualization of principles. To understand, the student must do, and that may prove interesting. Imitation gives the student something to do.

Imitations may be "loose" or "close." "Loose" imitation aims for faint resemblance; it requires a perception of the model that looks at its most conspicuous features such as tone, arrangement of ideas, purple passages, and the general character of the diction. A belief in the efficacy of loose imitation requires students to propose modestly like Swift, or wax indignant like James Baldwin, or lyricize like Loren Eisely. But because all successful writing, no matter its genre, is the cumulative effect of hundreds, indeed thousands, of minor decisions involving the smallest units of sense, the student is ignorant of the mechanics of the effect he is told to imitate and may indeed even miss the effect because ignorant of its cause. I can show my students a passage of Edmund Wilson or Ernest Hemmingway and tell them to go and do likewise but this is much like telling them to construct a house from a snapshot.

Close imitation aims at strong resemblance and therefore requires rigorous analysis. The student must deal with the model concretely, as a piece of writing, and the instructor must track every rhetorical effect to its source. When whole essays or chapters serve as model the result is parody or

pastiche. Close imitation is most useful when it confines its attention to individual paragraphs or even sentences.

Here is how close imitation may work. The student is given or chooses a subject; he has already been assigned a model, say a paragraph from one of Loren Eiseley's essays. Since the student's subject and Eiseley's are different, the model serves only as a guide to grammatical form and rhetorical device and effect. Sentence by sentence, word by word, the student shapes his thought after a pattern. The model becomes a program, an agendum. If a particular sentence is of a certain length, structure, or mode, so must the student's be. If Eiseley's words belong to a certain grammatical category or lexical class, the student follows suit. If Eiseley sneers, waxes poetic, ironizes, the student must do likewise if, of course, his own subject can accommodate that treatment.

Perhaps a further illustration would be helpful. A few years ago Otis Winchester and Winston Weathers, colleagues of mine, published a book involving a method of imitation very much like this. It was called Copy and Compose, A Guide to Prose Style. It was a small book, each page of which featured a model sentence or paragraph which the student was advised first to copy, legibly in ink and on clean white paper, and then imitate. The assumption was that the very act of writing out the model--writing being a physical as well as intellectual activity--served to impress upon the students a pattern of

thought and rhythm. Most important, however, was the imitation, wherein according to the authors, the students "imitate the manner and style, the structure and syntax, and the formality and texture of the model."[7]

What is the value of this? In the first place, the model generates ideas. The most awesome inadequacy of the apprentice writer is not that he knows nothing but that he does not know how to bring what he knows to bear upon the development of a subject. Because it provides what is essentially a slot and filler rhetoric, close imitation exorcises the horror of the blank page. In imitating the model, the student is forced to discover counterparts for each of the model's ideas. As he fills in the slots, completes the program, responds to the agendum, he mines sources of content and learns new "mining" techniques that he may use to good advantage when there is no model before him. As a procedure, then, closé imitation fills one of the most conspicuous gaps in our modern rhetorical theory, the absence of a practical heuristic.

In the second place, close imitation may produce in the student a hightened sense of form. Indeed it must, if there is to be any structural resemblance between a model sentence or paragraph and what the student writes. Unless the student is already possessed of a great many rhetorical skills, imitation demands that he create sentence types he might not otherwise have created. Moreover, not only can imitation increase his

awareness of the variety of sentence types available, it also requires that he analyze the effects those structures produce. The rhetorical effects of the series, of antithesis and balance, of climax and anti-climax are best understood when actually done. And what a student does once, with an understanding of what he has done, can probably be done again.

In the third place, close imitation sharpens the student's sense of style. Good styling requires an awareness of the possible, grammatical and rhetorical, which the model demonstrates. It demands of the writer a stock of words and a sense of how an audience might respond to them. But while imitation allows the student to borrow forms and devices, it demands he find his own words, predicate his own predications, fill in his own series, balance his own antithesis, and ransack his own experience for the matter of his own metaphors. Imitated closely, the model thus not only gives the student something to think about; it requires that he think something specific up. If his vocabulary is not up to the task, then it must be expanded. It might never occur to the student to express an idea figuratively, left to his own devices. But once again, the model is continuously telling him the kind of thing to do. Paradoxically, close imitation may enhance the ability of a student to select stylistic options by restricting his freedom to write the way he wishes.

Imitation offers as well a measure of rhetorical success

that the student may not have previously enjoyed. The problem with most student writing is that it satisfies its author's expectations and its author expects very little. In the great majority of cases, he demands only that he write the way he has written in the past. What else does he know? And yet he is continually punished for not "improving." He might as well be punished for not being "good," or for not thinking "clearly," or for failing to be "right." Imitation, on the other hand, strenuously imposes the expectations of someone who knows how to write, and with the instructor's mediation these expectations can be clearly defined and therefore realized. The model tells the student exactly what kind of thing to do. But while it is basic, imitation is not an unsophisticated procedure. It simply mirrors what probably all writers unconsciously do and what a great many accomplished writers have consciously done. The difference between a talented writer and an untalented one is not so much that the first needs no model but that his urge to express his talent is likely to compell him to find one. Close imitation formalizes and condenses a natural impulse; in so doing it permits the development of rhetorical skills in a shorter time than those same skills would be acquired through desultory reading and unstructured writing exercises.

The method of teaching I have been describing is, of course, coercive. That brings up the question of whether or not it violates the student's own style and, more importantly, the

the unique personality that style expresses. The answer is that is does. Imitation lures the student's style after fashions, invites the student's mind down the path of someone else's consciousness. Because we think, and rightly, that there is something sacred about the individual personality, most of us feel uncomfortable with coersion. We really do not want to impose an alien sensibility on a young mind, even though often our very presence and influence in the classroom answers to that description. What we might consider, however, is the nature of the imposition, the extent of the violation.

The personality may be sacred but it is not static nor particularly delicate. It is a structure, but also a dynamic process, and while it has fixed quantities these are subject to relocation, emphasis or deemphasis, as the person struggles to accommodate new impressions. The social conditions that produce anxiety and neurosis are also the essential conditions for personal growth: interplay, even friction, between the self and others. Imitation produces such friction by conjoining essentially different styles and by implication essentially different personalities. Imitation, moreover, reflects what Andras Angyal has called the universal and basic characteristic of all human beings, a tension between the urge to self express (autonomy) and the urge to conform (homonomy).[8] Viewed from such a perspective, the model is analogous to the student's culture. It conditions his responses by imposing upon him a set of sanctions and providing a program of action. On the

other hand, the student's own style (i.e. how he feels like writing) is analogous to his drive to self-determine. Since the model is not necessarily a permanent influence and the degree of his conformity is optional, the student has as much freedom in working out a compromise in opposing impulses in writing as he does in governing his own morality in society.

So conceived, imitation is not so much the basis of self-repression as for self-discovery. Self-awareness is not spontaneous. It develops, psychologists tell us, from interaction with persons and things. Neither is the student's sense of style spontaneous. Indeed, most students are not aware they have a style, and of those who are aware few can even begin to describe its characteristics. But if, as we sometimes declare, style is the man, then perhaps the conditions that permit us to know ourselves are the same conditions that permit us to know our style.

In a recent book on personality theory, Shelley Duval and Robert Wicklund posit three conditions for objective self-awareness.[9] The viewpoints of two persons must conflict, must concern the same object, must be simultaneously perceived. Their approach modifies the earlier theories of G.H. Mead and Jacques Piaget, to whom experiencing or sharing the perception of another or attaining an objective point of view are prerequisites to self-knowledge. All, however, hold social interaction as fundamental to that knowledge.

Now too often the apprentice writer's sense of style, unlike his personality, exists in splendid isolation. Indeed, one way to define the freshman writer is as someone who seriously believes that the sentence he has just committed to paper is its only possible expression. This is a kind of stylistic egotism. Students must learn that their characteristic manner of writing is a style, not the style, just as they gain self-identity through the recognition that they are not the one, but one among many. Imitation provides for such a perspective by bringing the style of the model and the style of the student into the same cognitive dimension. The conflict in viewpoint Duval and Wicklund require is supplied by the degree of disparity between the rhetorical skill of the model and that of the student, the simultaneity of recognition by the act of imitation itself, which essentially conflates two different modes of perception and manners of expression.

An illustration from Duval and Wicklund may, with a little imagination, be applied to stylistic self-awareness:

> The child's beginnings in objective self-awareness are comparable to the experience of a stranger in a foreign country. Just as the child acted as though he assumed a universal consciousness, the traveler from America (or anywhere else) all too often appears to assume universal customs that are coincident with those back home. Because the traveler acts as though culture is a universal constant, he is also unaware of possible conflicts between his culture and others, just as the egocentric child was unaware of the possible clashes between his viewpoint and those of others. As the

> visitor comes into contact with the local customs, he finds himself in conflict, especially when the legal correlates of the local customs threaten him with imprisonment, ostracism, and other punishments. Once he experiences the contradiction of the alternative customs his own culture should begin to assume an object like status...The contact with a differing set of behavioral assumptions has caused the person to become objectively self-aware with respect to his own culture, to see it as a distinct culture because it has been brought into conflict.10

Nothing is more foreign to the average freshman writer than the quality of good prose. But there is nothing remarkable about this. We are all born bad writers; our redemption from that state is slow and painful. We are shriven of stylistic unawareness not by mere "exposure" but by intimate involvement with a style clearly not ours.

But let me reiterate. The purpose of close imitation is not to write like someone else. We shall never do that and shouldn't. The purpose is to learn to write. And the purpose of imitation is not to lose self-identity but to find it by achieving an objective awareness of our own style. The purpose of a successful composition course ought not to be the production of eight, ten, fifteen or so essays certifying the student literate. The purpose is to learn to write, and if the only method of instruction offered by the instructor were the kind of close imitation I have described and the product of the course a series of parodies, then so be it. We do not learn to write in final versions but in first drafts. In a writing class, what the student produces is not so impor-

tant as what he learns, and the problem in most composition classes is that the writing exercises simply do not exercise.

To some of you the procedures I have been describing will seem plain druggery. Others here will not share my sanquine view of tension. But I do not like to romanticize writing. It is a skill, and it can be taught. If it is true, as rhetoricians from Quintilian on have agreed, that students cannot be taught to write greatly, that is not our commission. We in our profession are faulted not because we fail to produce great writers but because we fail to produce enough competent ones. Nor do I underrate the capacities of my students. The complex of talents that account for good writing is not properly compared to a flower whose delicate petals fall at the first blast of discipline. On the contrary, the proper analogue is the muscle, that will develop capacity only as it is worked. I propose the old doctrine of imitation as herein modified as one way to competence and self-discovery.

Notes

1. Presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, St. Louis, Missouri, March 13, 1975.

2. Poetics, 4. 1. For an excellent discussion of Aristotle's Mimesis see, Aristotle's Poetics, ed. D.W. Lucas, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), pp. 258-72.

3. The Art of Persuasion in Greece (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963) and The Art of Rhetoric in the Roman World (Princeton, 1972).

4. The Institutio Oratoria of Quintilian, trans. H.E. Butler (Harvard, 1958), X, xx ii. 2.

5. Saturnalia, VI, 1. Quoted in Harold Ogden White, Plagiarism and Imitation During the English Renaissance (Harvard, 1935), p. 5.

6. Institutio Oratoria, X. ii. 27.

7. (New York, 1969), p. 3.

8. Foundations For A Science of Personality (Harvard, 1941), esp. pp. 20-55, 167-207.

9. A Theory of Objective Self-Awareness, pp. 29-56.

10. Duval and Wicklund, pp. 51-2.